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ABSTRACT

Male and female subjects identified as very attractive or very unattractive worked in an interview-like situation with a listener of the opposite sex who was presented so as to maximize or minimize his or her natural attractiveness. Intimacy of self-disclosure was found to be significantly greater for females than for males, significantly greater for unattractive than for attractive subjects, and significantly greater to an attractive than to an unattractive listener. The results are discussed in terms of sex differences in American socialization processes, interpersonal response style differences between attractive and unattractive people, and the social stimulus value of good looks. Directions for applied research into areas such as counseling and police interrogation are also considered. (Author)

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Self-Disclosure in Male-Female Encounters

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Much of the recent literature in the social psychology of interpersonal processes has focused on the study of two major variables, namely, physical attractiveness (Berscheid & Walster, 1974) and self-disclosure (Chaikin & Derlega, 1976). But with only two notable exceptions (Brundage, Derlega, & Cash, 1977; Cash & Soloway, 1975), there has been no research into possible relationships between these two, apparently powerful dimensions of social interaction. Moreover, in view of the methods used, the data bases provided by both of these previous studies permit only the most limited of inferences. In the study by Brundage et al., intimacy of disclosure was found to be greater to attractive than to unattractive target persons, but instead of using in vivo transactions, the target others were represented in photos and the disclosure measure was based on written self-descriptions. In Cash and Soloway's post hoc examination of data collected for other purposes, the disclosure measure was based on in vivo transactions, but subjects were paired randomly rather than being assigned to pairs according to attractiveness, and attractiveness was assessed primarily through subjects' self-evaluations.

The present study was thus designed to clarify the relationships between these two variables by investigating experimentally the separate and interactive effects of systematic manipulation of attractiveness pairings in in vivo dyadic encounters. More specifically, the study investigated differences

in the intimacy of self-disclosure by men and women reliably identified as attractive or unattractive in their interaction with an attractive or unattractive other of the opposite sex.

Given the accumulating empirical testimony to the importance of physical attractiveness as a determinant of heterosexual attraction (e.g., Berscheid, Dion, Walster, & Walster, 1971; Walster, Aronson, Abrahams, & Rottman, 1966) and interpersonal evaluative judgments (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972; Miller, 1970), it is reasonable to assume that attraction to someone of the opposite sex is likely to be positively associated with that other person's physical attractiveness. Relevant to these observations, both Altman and Taylor's (1973) social penetration theory and Argyle and Dean's (1965) affiliative conflict theory suggest that intimacy of disclosure facilitates development of intimate interpersonal relationships. And recent research (Pellegrini, Hicks, & Webster, 1977) has indicated that, for females at any rate, disclosure does indeed operate as an instrumental affiliative act employed as a means of winning or avoiding approval of an other of the opposite sex. Working from these considerations, and the supporting finding from one of the two previous studies (Brundage et al., 1977) of such processes in which female subjects only were tested, disclosure was expected to be greater to attractive than to unattractive others.

Empirical inquiry into relationships between an individual's own attractiveness and his or her disclosure style is virtually non-existent. So, rationales and inferences in this area are necessarily conjectural. There is, however, a substantial body of literature (e.g., Barocas & Karoly, 1972; Berscheid & Walster, 1974) indicating that physically attractive people experience more favorable evaluations and greater social approval than do unattractive people. Thus it is plausible that a developmental history rich

in such interpersonal reinforcement might predispose attractive people to a greater personal openness just as a history comparatively impoverished of such experiences may engender a quality of guardedness in unattractive people. In the only other study which has investigated this problem (Cash & Soloway, 1977), males who perceived themselves as attractive were found to reveal more about themselves than did men who perceived themselves as less attractive, but females' self-perceptions of physical attractiveness were negatively related to their disclosure scores. Cash and Soloway reason that these sex differences in the relationship between attractiveness and disclosure may be attributable to the fact that physical attractiveness is emphasized more in our society for women than for men, so that beautiful women tend to "let their looks speak for themselves" whereas less attractive women learn to rely more on verbal means of achieving interpersonal attraction. On the basis of the foregoing considerations then, an interaction would be expected between subjects' sex and their attractiveness as related to self-disclosure. Given the scarcity of data for these speculative inferences and hypotheses, a principal aim of the present study was to clarify the relevant issues experimentally using independent judges' ratings in the measurement of both attractiveness and subjects' self-disclosure in in vivo interactions.

Method

Subjects

Subjects in the experiment were 48 male and 48 female undergraduates at San Jose State University, all of whom were recruited from sections of General Psychology requiring research participation.

Procedure

Manipulation of subjects' attractiveness was achieved by selecting from large sections of General Psychology 24 male and 24 female students unanimously rated by four independent judges (2 males, 2 females) as "very attractive", and 24 more males and 24 more females unanimously rated by the four judges as "very unattractive" on a 5-point scale. These evaluations were based on observations of the students in small discussion groups by the judges who worked as teaching assistants in the course. Laboratory test sessions were scheduled individually during regular class meetings for students so identified, with subject selection presumably conducted at random from the class roster.

Physical attractiveness of the target other was manipulated by altering the appearance of experimental confederates. In the unattractive condition, the male and female hired to serve as "listeners" (Ls) in the experiment were presented in such a way as to create as unappealing an appearance as possible. As has been done in previous studies (e.g., Sroufe, Chaikin, Cook, & Freeman, 1977), this manipulation was accomplished through cosmetic procedures designed to obscure the confederates' natural attractiveness in the unattractive condition--e.g., creating circles under the eyes, blemishes on the face, unkempt hair, unappealing eyeglasses, etc. In the attractive condition, the opposite approach was taken so as to emphasize the L's natural good looks. This aspect of the procedure was supervised throughout by a consultant experienced in the use of such techniques in professional theatrical productions.

In a modification of a procedure used in previous research (Pellegrini, Hicks, & Gordon, 1970), upon arriving at the laboratory, the experimenter instructed all subjects as follows:

"We're studying the process of communication between two people in different sorts of circumstances. Your job in the experiment will be to describe yourself to another person. Try to give him (her) a complete picture of yourself. Just tell him about you."

"There are some special conditions of the situation. First, the person you're going to be working with isn't allowed to ask questions or to talk back to you. He (she) has been instructed to just listen to you. Another condition is that at the end of the interview, he'll (she'll) be tested to find out how well he (she) remembers what you tell him (her). In order to check the accuracy of his (her) memory, we'll make a tape recording of the interview."

"Now, although you're going to try to give your listener a good picture of yourself, the choice of specifically what to say and how to say it is up to you. I'll interrupt you in 10 minutes. Try to keep talking until I interrupt you."

The subject was then led to the laboratory room where the L was already seated. The L, as noted above, was an experimental confederate trained to listen to a speaker in a relaxed, interested way, emitting affiliative or social reinforcing behaviors such as smiling, head nods, eye-contact, and 'uh-huhs' at a controlled rate programmed for consistency across all subjects, and at as closely comparable a frequency as possible in the two listener-attractiveness presentation conditions. The subject was seated in an office-type chair with armrests identical to the one in which L was seated, at a distance of about 4'6' from L, a distance empirically established as within the proximity range of comfortable conversation (Sommer, 1961). To avoid confounding due to L bias, the Ls were told nothing about the experiment

other than what was quite obvious--i.e., that it concerned the effects of physical attractiveness on interpersonal communication processes.

After the subject and L were introduced, the experimenter started a Wollensak tape recorder situated on a small table set to the side of the subject's chair. The experimenter left the room saying "I'll be back in about 10 minutes. Try to keep talking until I interrupt you." The experimenter re-entered the room after exactly 10 minutes and announced the end of the experiment. The subject was then escorted out of the interview room and taken to another room where he (she) was debriefed, thanked for participating, and dismissed.

Experimental Design

Half of the subjects of each sex who had been identified as "very attractive" or "very unattractive" ($n = 12$) were randomly assigned to work with the opposite sex confederate presented in the attractive condition, and the remaining half of the subjects of each sex so identified were randomly assigned to work with the opposite sex confederate presented in the unattractive condition. The variables of subjects' sex, subjects' attractiveness (very attractive or very unattractive), and listener's attractiveness (attractive or unattractive) were thus represented in a completely crossed, 2X2X2 factorial experimental design with 12 subjects per cell.

Dependent Measure

The self-disclosure measure was based on blind ratings of the intimacy of each subject's self-disclosure to L. The ratings were made by two independent judges, neither of whom was involved in rating subjects' attractiveness, using the tape recordings of the experimental interviews. The judges' ratings

were made on a single 20-point scale anchored at the low (1) end by the phrase "Little Personal Information Given", and at the high (20) end by the phrase "Extremely Intimate Information Given".

Results

Manipulation Check

In order to validate the manipulation of L's attractiveness, groups of students drawn from the same population out of which the final experimental sample was selected judged the physical attractiveness of the confederates in each of the two appearance conditions. These students, none of whom were included in the final experimental sample, were told that the person (L) they were to observe through a one-way mirror was a graduate trainee in clinical psychology, and that the purpose of these observations was to evaluate his (her) social stimulus value. These observers were asked to give their immediate first impressions of the physical appearance of L as he or she sat facing the observation window, working busily. In this way, 16 female observers evaluated the attractiveness of the male L in the attractive presentation condition, and another 16 females judged the male L's attractiveness in the unattractive condition. The same procedure was followed using two independent groups of 16 male observers per group to rate the attractiveness of the female L in the two attractiveness presentation conditions. The observers expressed their perceptions of L on a 20-point rating scale anchored at the low end (1) by the phrase "very unattractive", and at the high end (20) by the phrase "very attractive". In support of the effectiveness of the experimental manipulation, the female L was seen as significantly ($t = 7.95$, $df = 30$, $p < .001$) more attractive by the male observers when presented in the

attractive (M = 16.87, SD = 1.89) than in the unattractive (M = 10.69, SD = 2.34) condition, and the male L was seen as significantly (t = 4.55, df = 30, $p < .001$) more attractive when presented in the attractive (M = 15.06, SD = 2.11) than in the unattractive (M = 11.63, SD = 2.03) condition.

Disclosure Analysis

For all subjects taken together, the judges' intimacy of disclosure ratings were highly correlated (r = .82). Thus the average of the two judges' ratings was used as the disclosure unit of analysis for each subject. The group means and standard deviations on this measure are summarized in Table 1. The scores on which the data matrix of Table 1 are based were analyzed by means of a 2X2X2 factorial analysis of variance. As shown in Table 2, this analysis revealed significant main effects for all three factors, but no significant interactions. Intimacy of disclosure was found to be significantly greater (F = 12.96, df = 1/88, $p < .001$) for females (M = 10.79, SD = 3.80) than for males (M = 8.40, SD = 3.37), significantly greater (F = 10.80, df = 1/88, $p < .005$) for unattractive (M = 10.69, SD = 3.67) than for attractive (M = 8.50, SD = 3.58) subjects, and significantly greater (F = 16.31, df = 1/88, $p < .001$) to the L in the attractive (M = 10.94, SD = 3.75) than in the unattractive (M = 8.25, SD = 3.33) presentation condition.

Discussion

The finding of significantly greater intimacy of disclosure by females than by males in the present study is in accord with results reported in a number of earlier investigations (e.g., Dimond & Munz, 1967; Himelstein & Lubin, 1965; Jourard & Lasakow, 1958; Pederson & Higbee, 1969). Jourard (1964)

has attributed such differences to the capacity for more intense empathic identification and insight, as well as a longer life span in females. But the failure to obtain significant sex differences in several other studies (e.g., Dimond & Helkamp, 1969; Rickers-Ovsiankina & Kusmin, 1958; Vondracek & Marshall, 1971) introduces considerable ambiguity into the interpretation of sex differences in disclosure. And, as has been noted elsewhere (Cozby, 1973), examination of studies which have tested for sex differences in disclosure yields no clear pattern to account for the conflicting results. Nonetheless, the fact that no study has revealed greater disclosure by males than by females reinforces the inference that sex differences in the opposite direction are validly representative.

If females do indeed disclose more than do males, one plausible explanation for this difference follows from consideration of traditional sex-role socialization practices which (implicitly or explicitly) convey the attitude that social approval and acceptance are more important for females than for males. Insofar as disclosure is consciously or unconsciously employed as an ingratiation tactic then, sex differences in disclosure such as those observed in the present study vis-a-vis age-group peers of the opposite sex may reflect stylistic differences in interpersonal response dispositions. In any case, this is an issue in need of clarification through subsequent inquiry.

The interaction between subjects' sex and their judged attractiveness predicted on the basis of the rationale derived from Cash and Soloway's (1977) study, was not obtained here. In the present study, unattractive subjects of both sexes were found to express a greater intimacy of disclosure in their communication with a listener of the opposite sex than did attractive subjects.

The methodological differences noted above between the present study and Cash and Soloway's post hoc data analysis undoubtedly account in part for the differences in results. In any case, one way of interpreting the sex difference main effect observed here is that both good-looking MEN and women "let their looks speak for themselves", while less attractive people of both sexes rely more on verbal means of achieving interpersonal attraction. Another possibility is that insofar as attractive people of both sexes have a greater degree of choice in establishing intimate relationships, they are more discriminating in expression of behaviors such as self-disclosure which may lead to the development of such relationships. But a clear understanding of these processes requires further research into interactions between personal attractiveness and dimensions of personality such as self-esteem and perceived effectiveness in both intimate and casual interpersonal transactions as they may relate to self-disclosure and self-presentation.

The significant main effect indicating greater disclosure by both attractive and unattractive subjects of both sexes to the attractive as compared with the unattractive listener is potentially the most important finding in the study. This result suggests that the powerful social attraction value of a good-looking person of the opposite sex may somehow elicit from others a disposition toward greater openness in the expression of personal intimacy than does unattractiveness. Such differences in disclosure may thus serve as a verbal communication mechanism for decreasing or increasing psychological distance from attractive and unattractive others, respectively. The specific situational, perceiver, and stimulus variables governing the elicitation of such interpersonal approach and avoidance motives as they may affect disclosure, however, remain to be determined empirically. But whatever the dynamics of

these effects, further inquiry is unquestionably warranted along applied lines such as in counseling, psychotherapy, interview, and police interrogation settings, with attention directed to systematic analysis of the content of information disclosed.

Footnote

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Table 1

Summary of Cell Means and Standard Deviations on Self-Disclosure*

	Male Subjects		Female Subjects	
	Attractive	Unattractive	Attractive	Unattractive
Attractive Listener	$\bar{X}$ = 7.92 SD = 3.26	$\bar{X}$ = 10.83 SD = 3.35	$\bar{X}$ = 11.42 SD = 3.52	$\bar{X}$ = 13.58 SD = 3.02
Unattractive Listener	$\bar{X}$ = 6.58 SD = 2.84	$\bar{X}$ = 8.25 SD = 3.07	$\bar{X}$ = 8.08 SD = 3.31	$\bar{X}$ = 10.08 SD = 3.60

*High scores indicate greater intimacy of disclosure.

Table 2

Summary of Anova of Self-Disclosure Scores

SV	df	MS	F
A (Subject's Sex)	1	137.76	12.96**
B (Subject's Attractiveness)	1	173.34	16.31**
C (Listener's Attractiveness)	1	114.84	10.80*
AB	1	.26	.02
AC	1	12.76	1.20
BC	1	3.01	.28
ABC	1	1.76	.17
Within Cell	88	10.63	

* $p < .005$
** $p < .001$